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Coordination, programme and other questions: proclamation of an international year of mountains

Report of the Secretary-General

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Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 1997/45 of 22 July 1997 entitled "Proclamation of an international year of mountains", mindful that mountains represented an essential component of the global life-support system and recognizing that they were essential to the survival of the global ecosystem, welcomed and supported the ongoing efforts to protect fragile mountain ecosystems and to promote sustainable mountain development. In the same resolution, the Council requested the Secretary-General, in consultation with Governments and relevant international, regional and non-governmental organizations, to submit to the Council at its substantive session of 1998, a report on the desirability of proclaiming an international year of mountains and on other ways and means of ensuring the sustainable development of mountain countries.

2. In accordance with the above-mentioned request, the Chairman of the Commission on Sustainable Development, which considers sustainable mountain development in the context of its periodic reviews of the implementation of chapter 13 (Managing fragile ecosystems: sustainable mountain development) of Agenda 21,[1] sought the views of member States and observer States on this matter. Similar invitations for comments were conveyed to the organizations of the United Nations system participating in the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD) of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), as well as to international, regional and non-governmental organizations with an interest in sustainable mountain development. The replies received from all these sources have provided valuable assistance in the preparation of the present report. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which serves as IACSD task manager for chapter 13 of Agenda 21, provided a significant contribution to this report.

I. Desirability of proclaiming an international year of mountains

3. The inclusion of a separate chapter on mountains in Agenda 21, adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, indicates the crucial importance of these fragile ecosystems to the international community. As noted in Economic and Social Council resolution 1997/45, at least one fifth of the Earth's land surface is covered by mountains, and about 10 per cent of the world's population live in mountainous regions, including highlands. A far greater proportion of the world's population depends on mountain resources such as water, agriculture, forestry, mining and biological diversity. It is estimated that mountains provide the freshwater needs for more than half of humanity – are, in effect, the "water towers" of the world – a point brought out in the recent discussion of freshwater issues at the sixth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development held from 20 April to 1 May 1998.[2] Mountains also provide a significant portion of the Earth's timber, minerals and grazing land. As reported by FAO, mountains harbour by far the largest number of distinct ethnic groups, varied remnants of cultural traditions, environmental knowledge and habitat adaptations; they host some of the world's most complex agro-cultural gene pools and traditional management practices. The fact that mountains offer a rich variety of vast natural landscapes and cultures has made them very attractive in terms of tourism, one of the world's largest industries. These resources and services in mountain areas are of more than national or regional importance; they have a truly global significance for the future of humankind.[3]

A. Indications of support for a year, including suggestions for proposed activities

4. The replies received from Governments and international, regional and non-governmental organizations to the requests for views on the desirability of declaring an international year of mountains recognize the important and essential attributes of mountains described above and the critical need to protect and manage sustainably their fragile ecosystems. All 16 replies received from Governments support the proposal to proclaim an international year of mountains and several indicate that they are already planning or considering special activities to be held in connection with such a year. In Kyrgyzstan, a number of activities are planned or have already been undertaken as a follow-up to the 1996 Bishkek conference and in preparation for an international year, including a regional "Workshop on Central Asian Mountains", held in Bishkek in May 1998. The Government of Kyrgyzstan hopes that this workshop, which was held in collaboration with the Asia Pacific Mountain Network (APMN) and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), will be a model for additional regional meetings on other continents held to mark an international year of mountains. The sponsors expect that inputs from such meetings could contribute to a proposed international conference on mountains and development that would take place in Bishkek

during such an international year. In addition, the International University of Kyrgyzstan and ICIMOD have agreed, in a memorandum of understanding signed in January 1998, on a number of other preparatory activities, including the establishment of an international organizing committee for a year of mountains. Other specific ideas with respect to promoting an international year include a proposal by Andorra to organize an international seminar on the influence of a mountain environment on the philosophy of foreign relations, and the possible convening by Switzerland of a symposium linking science and community development.

5. Several other States (Germany, Italy, Pakistan, Turkey) indicated that they would be planning special events to celebrate an international year of mountains should a decision be taken to declare one. Some respondents (France, Switzerland) noted the importance of regional initiatives, for example, within the framework of the Alpine Convention.[4] Others (Japan, Lesotho) have stated that activities would be planned in connection with national legislative proposals, including national action plans for Agenda 21. Mongolia conveyed the expectation that an international year of mountains would contribute to a better understanding of landlocked mountainous countries.

6. Among United Nations organizations, FAO has been designated task manager for mountain issues by IACSD and could be expected to continue its role as lead agency during an international mountain year. To facilitate the implementation of chapter 13 of Agenda 21, FAO has been planning to hold a global consultation on sustainable mountain development in 1999 or 2000, but the organization has indicated that the year could be changed to coincide with an international year of mountains, should one be declared after 1999 or 2000. FAO sees the objectives of an international year of mountains as encompassing increased awareness of, and knowledge about, mountain ecosystems, their dynamics and functioning; promotion and defence of the cultural heritage of mountain communities; and conservation and sustainable development of mountain resources for present and future human well-being.

7. The United Nations University (UNU) has also been active in promoting mountain research and development, particularly during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development process, and currently supports (with the International Mountain Society) a quarterly journal called "*Mountain Research and Development*". UNU anticipates that an international year of mountains could contribute to a better public awareness of the value and fragility of mountain environments and could correct some of the misunderstandings concerning mountains that continue to exist. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also contributes to the study and protection of mountain areas through its Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme.

8. Non-governmental organizations involved in mountain issues are committed to pursuing the goals of chapter 13 of Agenda 21, as well as to addressing new concerns such as conservation, culture and sacred values. Building on the momentum from the Earth Summit, a world consultation of mountain non-governmental organizations held in Lima in February 1995 formally established the International Mountain Forum, a network of organizations, institutions and individuals with a shared interest in sustainable mountain development. With major financial support provided by the Government of Switzerland, the Mountain Forum operates primarily as a decentralized structure with regional and subregional focal points established to coordinate networking activities. Much of its work is carried out through electronic mail consultations and conferences, which have helped canvass the views of a large number of non-governmental organizations on the desirability of proclaiming an international year. The Forum's regional networks have indicated their vigorous support for a United Nations declaration of an international year of mountains and have pledged the full cooperation and efforts of their members in its celebration. One of these, APMN is, as noted above, already working with ICIMOD and the International University of Kyrgyzstan to prepare for an international conference on mountains and development to be held during an international year. APMN sees among the benefits to be gained from such a year the further development of information networks, especially in the newly independent Central Asian States, and the stimulation of scientific research on mountain problems. APMN also has plans to collaborate with other partners in a travelling photographic exhibition to be called "Mountains of the world". The Mountain Institute (TMI), which currently serves as global representative for the over 600 members of the Mountain Forum, anticipates that the proclamation of an international year would not only greatly enhance global awareness of fragile mountain ecosystems, but also call attention to the need for specific policies and activities that support integrated community-based approaches to addressing the special needs of mountain people, who are among the world's poorest. In addition, several national non-governmental organizations based in India and Azerbaijan have responded to the request for views with their firm support for the declaration of an international year of mountains.

B. Timing of an international year of mountains

9. The Economic and Social Council's consideration in 1997 of an international year of mountains was based on a proposal submitted by the observer for Kyrgyzstan which had called for the proclaiming of such a year in 2000.[5] This date would coincide with the eighth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, which will focus on integrated planning and management of land resources, including mountain resources. Pakistan and all the non-governmental organizations that replied to the request for views supported Kyrgyzstan's suggested timing. The majority of other responses – though small in number – saw it as essential that there be adequate time for preparing an international year and considered that 2000 might be too soon to allow sufficient lead time. It was also noted that in 1997 the General Assembly had already proclaimed two international years to be celebrated in 2000, the International Year for the Culture of Peace and the International Year of Thanksgiving, in addition to calling attention to other activities in connection with the millennium – and proclaimed the year 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers[6]. Austria, Germany and Switzerland suggested in their responses that an international year of mountains could be held in 2002, when the 10-year overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21 would take place. Such an approach has recently been supported by the Government of Kyrgyzstan. FAO considers that choosing a year between 2001 and 2003 would help ensure more substantive activities and more concrete results.

10. It should perhaps be noted that the guidelines for future international years, contained in the annex to Economic and Social Council resolution 1980/67 of 25 July 1980 and adopted by the General Assembly in its decision 35/424 of 5 December 1980, contain procedures for organizing the celebration of international years that are relevant to the question of timing. Paragraph 16 of the guidelines states that in general, there should be a period of two years between the proclamation of an international year and the beginning of that year.

II. Ensuring the sustainable development of mountain countries

11. In considering ways and means through which Governments and international, regional, national and local organizations could help achieve a better understanding of mountain issues and greater cooperation in ensuring sustainable mountain development, the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1997/45 highlighted the following key elements:

(a) Awareness-raising activities (para. 1);

(b) Coordination of regional and international cooperation (para. 2);

(c) Exchange of information and experiences (para. 2);

(d) Support for subregional and interregional agreements on mountains regarding their protection and sustainable and equitable development (para. 3);

(e) Encouragement of regional, national and international networking activities (para. 4).

Each of these elements can make an important contribution to the furtherance of international cooperation and understanding, which constitute the declared purpose of celebrating international years. Each also encompasses, to varying extents, existing activities that offer opportunities for further success in efforts to ensure the sustainable development of mountain areas and their inhabitants.

12. Actions in support of these five areas can and do take place at all levels: at the international level through the Commission on Sustainable Development's monitoring of the implementation of chapter 13, through the FAO programmes dealing with sustainable mountain development and watershed management, and through the activities of other organizations such as UNESCO (MAB programme), the World Meterological Organization (WMO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UNU; at regional and subregional levels through those organizations and treaties devoted to specific mountain ranges of regions (for example, the Alpine Convention, APMN) and the network of agricultural research centres known as the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR); nationally through domestic legislative procedures and government initiatives, including the adoption of mountain-specific policies and laws and the establishment of national plans and commissions for sustainable development; and locally through grass-roots, largely non-governmental organizations, support for traditional, indigenous knowledge systems and the cultural heritage of mountain communities, as well as the improvement of the economic and social conditions of mountain peoples.

13. Possible ways and means to further the sustainable development of mountain areas are discussed below according to the type of activities identified by the Economic and Social Council last year. The analysis has been suggested by FAO, as task manager for chapter 13. FAO

supports the view that all these activities would likely be more widespread, more inclusive, and more effective with the added impetus that an international year of mountains could bring. The discussion may be set forth as follows:

(a) Awareness-raising: although there have been intensive efforts by organizations and groups dealing with mountains to inform people about, and involve them in, issues regarding mountains and their communities, further awareness-raising activities regarding mountain issues are required. While mountain specialists and interest groups are largely communicating through the Mountain Forum and other regional and local groups, the mountain communities need further support in the generation and dissemination of knowledge and experiences. In the view of FAO, a wealth of information and promotion activities have been launched since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at global, regional and national levels; however, awareness-raising activities at the national, subnational and local levels could be expanded to, *inter alia*:

(i) Inform the urban population (for example, schoolchildren) of the complex interrelationships existing between mountain and urban areas (in terms, for instance, of freshwater quantity and quality, sports and other recreational activities, specific products from mountain areas) and thereby improve (or re-establish) understanding and solidarity between upland and lowland communities;

(ii) Provide an impetus to create awareness and involve a greater number of stakeholders including national and local government structures, non-governmental organizations, communities and the private sector in the implementation of chapter 13;

(iii) Raise awareness on the need for reconciling conservation and development;

(iv) Provide an opportunity to raise awareness on biological diversity in mountain ecosystems;

(v) Raise awareness of geopolitical issues connected with mountains;

(b) Coordination of regional and international cooperation: a number of ongoing initiatives and cooperative frameworks have a particular relevance for mountain issues. Further efforts could help in promoting a common approach to and greater coordination of the implementation of international conventions and agreements (for example, on climate change, biological diversity, desertification, coastal areas and the MAB programme). An important development for future work was the October 1995 decision of the Council of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to include mountain ecosystems in one of four operational programmes within the biodiversity focal area. The importance of mountain ecosystems has also been emphasized by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. Furthermore, since 1997, GEF resources have also been directed to mountain areas through a UNU project called "People, land management and environmental change (PLEC)";

(c) Exchange of information and experiences: since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the "Mountain Agenda" (as the issues addressed in chapter 13 are called) has generated considerable enthusiasm and cooperative efforts, largely because of the dedication of the non-governmental organization community. An international year of mountains might be expected to provide a stimulus for further exploration and coordination of initiatives towards sustainable mountain development. In combination with the awareness-raising activities mentioned above, further efforts are required to enhance the collection, exchange and dissemination of information related to mountain issues and "best practices", based on the results of the large number of projects and programmes relevant to mountains initiated by United Nations agencies, national Governments and bilateral development agencies, international research centres and universities, international and local non-governmental organizations and committed individuals. A greater knowledge and awareness of the circumstances facing, mountain inhabitants and the constraints and challenges they are confronting, especially the most vulnerable groups of women, children and the disadvantaged, are required; but information should also be spread about the wealth of cultural values of which the mountain communities are depositories and guardians;

(d) Support for subregional and interregional agreements on mountains: a number of regional initiatives on sustainable mountain development have been undertaken. Various initiatives by mountain countries in the Alps, Andes, Carpathians, Caucasus, Himalaya-Hindu Kush and Pyrenees regions also provide possible frameworks for further cooperation at the scale of mountain ranges and complexes. There are, however, many mountain ranges – particularly in other parts of Asia and Eastern Europe, and in Africa and Central America – where considerable opportunities exist for regional initiatives to be fostered by interested regional and national Governments, bilateral agencies, international organizations, and others. The various regional elements of the Mountain Forum may have a particular role to play in mobilizing key stakeholders. There is also a need for more

transborder collaboration among countries sharing services from the same mountain ranges or unique biological riches;

(e) Regional, national and international networking: as indicated earlier, non-governmental organizations at all levels – international, regional and local – have taken a central role in developing and implementing networking initiatives among the international mountain community. The creation and expansion of the Mountain Forum, especially the worldwide Internet services maintained by the Mountain Institute (<http://www.mtnforum.org>), have been successful, but these efforts require further and continued support. A better sharing of knowledge, technology and experience is necessary for the effective management of mountain ecosystems.

III. Conclusions

14. The adoption by the international community in 1992 of chapter 13 of Agenda 21 has generated a genuine enthusiasm for and interest in mountain ecosystems and their conservation and sustainable development. This interest is a shared one among mountain communities, non-governmental organizations, international organizations and governmental institutions, at national, regional and international levels. There is a continuing need for rigorous interdisciplinary scientific research on mountains that takes into account the knowledge and traditions of the mountain inhabitants themselves. This need was emphasized in an independent 1997 study, prepared for the General Assembly's nineteenth special session to review the implementation of Agenda 21, which concluded that the global database on mountains was "unacceptably sparse" and that whatever data existed were often unreliable. Given the reality of an increasing scarcity of research funds, the authors called for further international collaborative efforts, including standardization of objectives and methods, sharing of data banks and identification of minimum needs.[7]

15. A more recent report, to be published by FAO in the latter half of 1998, concludes that what is now needed is an agreed prioritization – at regional and global levels – of the objectives contained in chapter 13 and other components of the "Mountain Agenda". The report suggests that while freshwater, biological diversity and tourism might be global priorities, each of the intergovernmental and non-governmental organization consultations held since Rio has produced its own, different set of priorities for mountain issues. The elaboration of national action plans for mountain areas and the integration of mountain concerns in national policies and strategies for sustainable development could help focus the decision-making process in mountain countries.[8]

16. The argument has been put forth by the active participants of the mountain community – Governments, international organizations, research institutions, non-governmental organizations, individuals and scholars – that the proclamation of an international year of mountains would provide an impetus for the work still required to achieve the objective of chapter 13, namely, sustainable mountain development. Other ways and means have also been suggested. The largely untapped role of the private sector – especially major industries like tourism, energy, forestry and mining, which affect mountain regions around the world – also offers opportunities.[9] While there is now a greater recognition of the enormous value mountains confer on the global economy, society and environment, much still needs to be done at all levels to protect, conserve and sustainably manage these resources. The responses received from Governments, non-governmental organizations and organizations of the United Nations system suggest that the proclamation of an international year of mountains at an appropriate time could contribute to the efforts to achieve such objectives.

Notes

[1] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.

[2] *See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1998, Supplement No. 9* (E/1998/29); also *Mountains of the World: Water Towers for the 21st Century*, a report prepared for the Commission on Sustainable Development by the Mountain Agenda, with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Bern, 1998.

[3] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Review of Implementation of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 from 1992 to 1997* (Rome, forthcoming), report prepared by Dr. Martin Price. See also Report of the Secretary-General on overall progress achieved since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: managing fragile ecosystems: sustainable mountain development (E/CN.17/1997/2/Add.12), prepared by FAO for the fifth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

[4] International Convention for the Protection of the Alps (Alpine Convention), signed by five Alpine countries and the European Union in 1991, entered into force in 1995. Two additional countries signed it subsequently.

[5] See letter dated 30 January 1997 from the Permanent Representative of the Kyrgyz Republic to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (E/1997/3); and also A/52/3.

[6] See General Assembly resolutions 52/15 entitled "Proclamation of the year 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace", 52/16 entitled "International Year of Thanksgiving, 2000", and 52/17 entitled "International Year of Volunteers, 2001", all adopted without a vote on 20 November 1997.

[7] See *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority*, B. Messerli and J. D. Ives, eds. (New York and London, Parthenon Publishing Group, 1997), pp. 12-13, and 455.

[8] See FAO, *Review of Implementation* ... The section entitled "Chapter 13 after UNGASS" is particularly relevant (pp. 52-65 of the unedited text).

[9] Some of these opportunities are discussed in *Investing in Mountains: Innovative Mechanisms and Promising Examples for Financing Conservation and Sustainable Development*, L. Presont, ed. (Franklin, West Virginia, Mountain Institute/FAO, 1997). The publication reports on an "electronic conference" organized by the Mountain Forum in 1996.